

Message Text

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ACTION H-03

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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 0096

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: OVIP, PGOV, PINT, SY
SUBJECT: CODEL ZABLOCKI: MEETING WITH SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY
LEADERS

1. CONGRESSMEN ZABLOCKI, FASCELL,
ILMAN, BURKE AND BINGHAM
MET WITH SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS FOR ABOUT ONE HOUR
JANUARY 4. JEWISH COMMUNITY COUNCIL PRESIDENT TOUTAH WAS
ACCOMPANIED BY RABBI HAMRA AND DRJV HASBANIM

2. TOUTAH TOLD CONGRESSMEN THAT SITUATION REGARDING JEWISH
COMMUNITY WAS BETTER THAN IT HAD BEEN IN PAST. PAST HAD BEEN
CHARACTERIZED BY INSTABILITY AND PERIODS OF REPRESSION
PARTICULARLY FOLLOWING CREATION OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL IN 1948
AND DISCOVERY OF ISRU SLI SPY ELIE COHEN IN 1965. MANY
COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAD LEFT SYRIA DURING THESE PERIODS AND
REMAINING COMMUNITY NUMBERED ABOUT 5500. TODAY UNDER ASSAD
REGIME COMMUNITY WAS WELL TREATED. IT ENJOYED FULL FREEDOM
OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE. ITS SCHOOLS OPERATED UNDER SAME
REGULATIONS AS OTHER PRIVATE SCHOOLS IN SYRIA AND JEWISH
STUDENTS HAD EQUAL ACCESS TO SYRIAN UNIVERSITIES.
MERCHANTS COULD TRADE WITHIN AND OUTSIDE SYRIA UNDER
SAME CONDITIONS AS OTHER SYRIANS. THE WORD "MUSAWI" (I.E.
"FOLLOWERS OF MOSES") STILL APPEARED ON JEWISH IDENTITY CARDS BUT
IT WAS NO LONGER STAMPED ACRVISED THEM IN RED. THE COMMUNITY WAS
REASONABLY PROSPEROUS AND ALL THOSE WISHING TO WORK
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WERE EMPLOYED. SYRIAN JEWS WERE NOT REQUIRED TO PERFORM
MILITARY SERVICE. REAL PROPERTY COULD BE BOUGHT FREELY
AND SOLD AFTER COMPLYING WITH MINOR GOVERNMENT FORMALITIES.
FOR THE PAST YEAR SYRIAN JEWS HAD BEEN ABLE TO TRAVEL
FREELY WITHIN
SYRIA.

3. AS FOR FOREIGN TRAVEL, TO"AH SEIDN 5HE GOVERNMENT HAD IN RECENT TIMEE PERMITTED SOME 100 COMZEKITY MEMBERS TO TRAVEL ABROAD FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT, BUSINESS REASONS OR TO VISIT RELATIVES. ABOUT 30 OF THESE HAD ABUSED THE PRIVILEGE BY TRAVELINGHVECRETLY TO ISRAEL HPSLE ABROAD. THE AUTHORITIES HAD DISCOVEIAD THIS AND HAD INTERROGATED THOSE WHO HAD TRAVELZM TO ISRAEL BUT NO SPECIAL MEASUSS HAD BEEN TAKEN AGAINST THEM. ISSUANCZIOF PASSPORTS TO COMMUNITY MEMBERSW HOWEVER, HAD BZQN SUSPENDED AND WAS ONLY NOWMBEGINNING TO BE RELAXED. ALL THOSE WHO WISHED TO TRAVEL ABROAD WERAUREQUIRED TO POST A BOND AGAINST THEIR RETURNSLHIGH COULD RUN AS HIGH AS \$10,000.

4. TOUTAH SAID THAT COMMUNITY BIGGEST PROBLEM WAS THE GROUP OF 100-200 UNMARRIED WOMEN WHO COULD NOT FIND HUSBANDS IN SYRIA AND WISHED TO TRAVEL ABROAD IN ORDEROP TO MARRY. QT WOULD NOT BE ACCEPTABLE FOR THEM TO MARRY OUTSIDE THE FAITH IN SYRIA, TOUTAH SAID. SOME 13 HAD BEEN ALLOWED TO TRAVEL TO THE US LAST SUMMER AFTER MARRIAGE BY PROXY TO AMERICAN MEN. OTHER MARRIAGE PETITIONS WEGY NOW BEING PREPARED IN US AND TOUTAH WAS HOPEFUL THAT SYRIAN AUTHORITIES WOULD PERMIT OTHER GIRLS TO TRAVEL UNDER THIS PROGRAM.

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5. TOUTAH REFUSED TO BE DRAWN INTO GIVING HIS VIEWS ON RECENT SADAT INITIATIAI BEYOND SAYING THAT IT WAS REGRETTABLE ARAB UNITY HAD BEEN BREACHED BY TMSE DEVELOPMENTS.

6. CONGRESSMEN ASKED JEWISH LEADERS HOW MANY COMMUNITY MEMBERS WOULD LEAVE IF THEY WERE FREE TO DO SO. DR. HASBANI ESTIMATED 50 PERCENT WHEREAS TOUTAH AFTER LENGTHY REVIEW OF IMPROVED CONDITIONS IN PRESENT KAY SYRIA, RHOUGHT 1000 WOULD BE THE MAXIMUM.

7. IN FINAL QUESTION REP. GILMAN NOTED THAT TOUTAH'S REPORT ON CURRENT CONDITIONS HAD BEEN MORE FAVORABLE THAN HE HAD EXPECVD. HE SAID THAT UHL CONGRESSMEN PRESENT HAD IMPORTANT JEWISH CONSTITUENCIES IN US AND ASKED WHETHER VIEWS WHICH TOUTAH HAD JUST EXPRESSED WERE THOSE HE WISHED THE CONGRESSMEN TO TAKE BACK TO US. TOUTAH REPLIED AFFIRMATIVELY. COMMUNITY WAS NOT LIVING UNDER PRESSURE, HE ASSERTED, AND ITS ONLY SERIOUS PROBLEMS WERE FOREIGN TRAVEL AND ITS UNMARRIED WOMEN.

8. SYRIAN JEWISM:OMMUNITY OFFICIALS STAYED FOR KINNER AT AOXASSADOR'S RESIDENCE FOLLOWINGBTHIS MEETING

AND HAD OPPORTUNIMYVT MEET NUMBER OF SNRIYC OFFICIALS
INCLUDING DEPFONMIN KHANI WHO HAD BEEN INVOLVED IN
MARFUAGE PROPOSAL PROJECT.

9. THIS MESSAGE CLEARED WITH CODEL PRIOR DEPARTURE
DAMASCUS JANUARY 6.
MURPHY

NOTE BY OC/T: TEXT AS RECEIVED.

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